

## Varmus agrees on need for more public input on NIH research...

[WASHINGTON] Harold Varmus, director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), promised last week to review "in detail" the recommendations of a report saying that the agency should do more to involve the public in its research decision-making (see *Nature* 394, 111; 1998).

"We agree that there is room for additional public input" into how NIH sets research priorities, Varmus said in a statement. He added that the agency would review the recommendations of the report over the next few months and decide how to implement them. The report was produced by the Institute of Medicine at the direction of the US Congress.

Some disease-based organizations have given the report strong support. The Juvenile Diabetes Foundation International, for example, said it "may provide a foundation for regaining the public's confidence in the NIH priority setting process".

But David Korn, senior vice-president of the Association of American Medical Colleges, criticizes the proposal that a new council of public representatives should meet the NIH director regularly but not lobby him on research priorities. "As soon as you put people who feel strongly about such matters on such a council, it's exactly what they're going to try to do," says Korn.

## ...as Specter battles on for 14.7% funding boost

[WASHINGTON] The chairman of a key US Senate subcommittee has returned from cardiac bypass surgery to proclaim that he is still seeking a \$2 billion, 14.7 per cent increase for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the 1999 budget he is drawing up.

Senator Arlen Specter (Republican, Pennsylvania) chairs the subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services and Education of the Senate Appropriations Committee. He had earlier vowed to land such an increase for NIH. But this was before his subcommittee was told that it only had \$1.1 billion more to work with in funding a wider range of agencies than it did last year.

The corresponding House subcommittee has proposed a \$1.24 billion, 9.1 per cent NIH increase, but slashed several social programmes to achieve it.

## Koplan to head Centers for Disease Control

[WASHINGTON] An epidemiologist who helped formulate the US response to the emergence of AIDS in the early 1980s was last week appointed director of the Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a \$2.3 billion agency with 6,900 employees.

Jeffrey Koplan, 53, is a former assistant surgeon general and the current president of the Prudential Center for Health Care Research in Atlanta. He will take up the new post on 5 October. He has long experience in public health, including chairing the Public Health Service's Executive Committee on AIDS from 1982 to 1984.

From 1989 to 1994, he was the first director of the CDC's National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. In that role, he established national early detection programmes for breast and cervical cancer.

## French education budget escapes spending curbs

[PARIS] France's 'superministry', encompassing national education, research and technology, seems set to be a major winner in the state budget for 1999, scheduled to be announced on 22 July. According to the budgetary ceilings for each ministry, fixed last week, the education ministry would obtain a 4 per cent increase over its 1998 budget of FF374 billion (US\$61 billion). In contrast, the budgets of most ministries would be held constant as part of efforts to curb public spending.

The increase will be required for an ambitious proposal, currently under discussion, to refurbish and expand the universities. The proposal — *Universités du troisième millénaire* — would be launched next year, and be similar in scale to *Université 2000*, a scheme launched in 1991 under which FF32 billion was spent on building more than 1.5 million square metres of university space. The new plan would focus on universities in and around Paris, according to one official.

## Indian nuclear experts get the cold shoulder

[NEW DELHI] The Indian government has admitted that a number of countries have imposed restrictions on visits by Indian nuclear scientists following the nuclear tests in May. The Canadian government, for example, has told the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna that it "would not welcome participation of nuclear experts from India in meetings in Canada until further notice".

Other countries are believed to have conveyed similar views informally or to have withheld visas. The United Kingdom has cut off all contact between its nuclear researchers and institutes and their counterparts in India and Pakistan. According to Govindarajan Padmanabhan, director of the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore, "the supply of research samples from US government laboratories has been put on hold".

## German universities to compete for extra cash

[MUNICH] Germany's research minister, Jürgen Rüttgers, last week promised to give universities an extra DM200 million (US\$109 million) in 1999. The money will be distributed on a competitive basis, and is primarily intended for multimedia equipment and for the establishment of courses compatible to Anglo-Saxon degrees.

There will also be more support for technology transfer schemes. The new grants will be controlled directly by the federal research ministry. The overall budget proposed by the cabinet would increase funding for the Department of Research, Education and Technology by 3.4 per cent.

## Japan's Mighty Whale to harness tidal power

[TOKYO] A floating electricity plant known as the 'Mighty Whale', and designed to capture the energy of ocean tides, was launched in Japan last week. The floating plant is 50 metres long and 30 metres wide, and designed to use turbines to produce 110 kilowatts of electricity an hour. It was developed by the Science and Technology Agency and the Japan Marine Science and Technology Centre, and built by Ishikawajima-Harima Heavy Industry. It will be tested for two years in Gokasho Bay on Japan's southern coast.

## UK museum completes £12m Earth Galleries



[LONDON] The opening this week of four new galleries in London's Natural History Museum marks the completion of a £12 million (US\$20 million) five-year redevelopment of the former Geological Museum into what are now known as the Earth Galleries.

The first gallery, 'From the beginning' (above), traces the geological evolution of the Earth from its origins in the 'big bang' 15 billion years ago. Exhibits include a meteorite studded with diamonds, and a rock sample returned from Mars. The galleries have been developed with a grant of £6 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund and £1 million from Rio Tinto Zinc plc.